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Cross-border e-learning: linguistic, cultural and technological problems

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Abstract

Internet-based education is growing at a fast pace and its potential to support the offer of educational materials and courses across national borders is very significant. Transnational cross-cultural e-learning is a vast theme and could be discussed in a number of different perspectives. In order to focus on a particular subset of the theme, this presentation will explore some of the issues faced when content travels across borders in the form of open educational resources (OER).

New communication technologies have been transforming the ways in which education is organised and delivered both on campus and at a distance (Littlejohn, 2003). E-learning affords opportunities for new models of education delivery, such as flexibility on time and space, on how courses are designed and on how content is produced (for example by drawing on content from different universities); and in terms of availability and access to resources through the Web. It also opens up opportunities for new business models and modes of study. Content nowadays can travel freely on the Internet, and be used in both formal and informal educational settings.

E-learning researchers have been showing a growing interest in understanding how content can be reused in different contexts (Laurillard, McAndrew, (2003), Downes (2007), Conole (2010). A number of approaches have been explored, such as the use of templates, the standardisation of the process of description of educational materials (such as terminology) and of learning designs, and the interoperability of technological tools. Given that each discipline has its own characteristics and technology evolves continuously, this is a major challenge faced by developers, content designers and teachers.

Moreover, there are a number of factors that may influence the successful use of freely available educational materials: linguistic barriers, technological readiness, cultural differences, educational traditions, pedagogic models, digital literacy, support infrastructure and institutional take-up. Within the scope of this presentation, these aspects will be addressed by means of presenting two examples of initiatives, in Africa and South America.

The pedagogical and digital literacy aspects will be explored by the example of an OER initiative that takes place in Zambia, at Aisha Project School. Linguistic barriers and institutional take-up will be discussed through the OER experience of UnisulVirtual in Florianopolis, Brazil, in collaboration with the Open University UK.

Educational traditions, cultural differences and technology readiness are themes that cut across both examples.

References

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